

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Recovering from Burnout

Seven years ago a therapist asked me *“what do you do to relax?”* and I replied *“sleep”*.

“No”, she said, “what do you do to relax when you’re awake?”

And I said *“sleep.”*

She asked me to describe a typical day, and I said *“I’m either with other people and I’m operating at 100% efficiency, being the best employee, the best partner and the best family member I can be ... or I’m by myself and I sleep.”*

She asked what happened when I was on holiday, and I said *“I either stay in my bedroom, or I lie in the cool under a tree, and sleep as much as I can to get the energy to come home and do it all again.”*

Apparently, that’s not the default state humans are meant to be living in. Without realising it I was describing a life of **masking** and **burnout**.

Since that revelation I’ve been trying to change my life to *“live in the middle”* between those two states of 100% efficiency and unconsciousness. I look for opportunities to change my life to fit me, rather than me always changing to fit in the world, and I try and do things that recharge my batteries every day so I’m not just *“heading for burnout”*.

My partner says I have three signs when I’m over doing things and haven’t realised:

My steering is off and I will bump into things without noticing. (He will hear me say “ow” walking through a doorway.)

I become more manic and try to do EVERYTHING. (He says on the days I should be doing the least I try to do the most.)

And there’s a delay answering simple questions, as my processing time is longer.

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That's when he checks in and says *"are you having a low spoons day?"* (non-judgemental) or *"do I need to put you to bed?"* (really annoying, but true).

I've discovered I'm not the only one in this situation. Most of my clients approach me because they've been signed off work with burnout, are heading towards burnout and don't know how to stop – or have been through a recent burnout and don't want it to happen again.

COMMON SIGNS OF BURNOUT

Some people don't know they are in burnout, especially if this has been your whole life's experience and you think *"that's how life is."*

Here are some signs to look out for:

Total exhaustion all the time

Being in *"Demand Avoidance Mode"* – not wanting to do anything, even self-care

Feeling down/ depressed

Getting quickly overstimulated

Increased anxiety

Increased irritability

Loss of appetite/ digestive issues

Loss of communication skills

Memory loss or gaps in recent memory

More frequent meltdowns

Reduced executive function

Seeming *"more autistic"* or more clumsy

Struggling to be with other people/ wanting to withdraw

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RECOVERING FROM BURNOUT

Since becoming a coach I've kept a list of anything people have said that helped them to recover from burnout:

- Allow yourself time to recover
- Avoid the news
- Be gentle with yourself and allow yourself to say "no"
- Being in a quiet dark room
- Concentrate on raw sensory data: what is my body telling me right now?
- Cut down on work projects and social events
- Discuss expectations with those around you. They may be setting lower expectations that you do on yourself
- Eat and drink safe and easy foods (*'mac and cheese' / soup seem to be very popular*)
- Get support from people around you
- Have lots of rest/ sleep/ naps
- Outsourcing executive functions as much as possible (*could be technological help or assistance from other people*)
- Participate in things that soothe your senses
- Putting hands or feet in a bowl of rice or lentils
- Reducing chores and social interactions
- Reducing sensory input (e.g. noise cancelling headphones)
- Set reminders and write things down
- Stim as much as you want/ are able/ where comfortable to do so (<https://neuroclastic.com/stimming-what-it-is-and-why-autistic-people-do-it/>)
- Take regular breaks
- Take time on your passions and interests
- Use energy accounting to set manageable limits
- Watch a favourite movie, TV show or listen to your favourite music

When I have difficulty sleeping I find it helps to take a break from caffeine and alcohol, but if you consume them every day you might want to cut down over a period of time. Sudden withdrawal can make you feel (temporarily) worse.

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AVOIDING BURNOUT IN FUTURE

When I work with people we often make two lists.

The first list is *"things that cost you energy"* and the second list is *"things that restore you"*.

The first list leads into a conversation about accommodations. How can your life be changed so that things cost you less?

The second list leads into a conversation about self-care, and how we can schedule good things into your life every day. That way you're not just spending energy and heading to bed, but able to recharge during the day as well.

Don't worry if you have no idea how to start these lists, especially if you're autistic. It takes a little experimentation and detective work and not many know the answers in advance. That's one of the ways that having a coach can help. *(I've discovered that seeing bumblebees is on my restore list, and if you'd told me that in advance I'd never have believed you.)*

Please let me know if you have any questions, suggestions you'd like to add or would like to chat more about this.

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